**Written evidence submitted by YMCA England and Wales (BYC025)**

**YMCA England & Wales response to the British Youth Council’s Youth Select Committee inquiry into the work experience opportunities available for young people and how these might be improved.**

YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries. In England & Wales, 116 YMCAs work to transform more than 740 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 630,000 people every year.

YMCA enables almost 68,000 people every year to engage in training and education. This includes basic life skills training, work and employment skills training, work experience and placement opportunities and apprenticeships.

**Introduction**

* 1. Young people today are facing an increasingly volatile job market as they struggle to make the transition from education to sustained employment.
  2. While the inherent disadvantages young people face as a result of their low experience levels is by no means new, their situation today is compounded by an education and skills system that is failing to equip them with that which employers need.
  3. The extent of the problem is illustrated by the fact that a British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) *Workforce Survey* found that 88% of employers believed school leavers were unprepared for the world of work, and 54% believed graduates were unprepared for the workplace.[[1]](#endnote-1)
  4. As such, it is important that in the drive to improve academic attainment, the broader skills young people need to succeed are not forgotten and sufficient work experience should be a key component of this.

**General**

1. **What does ‘good quality work experience’ look like? What do young people and business expect to get from it?**
   1. ‘Good quality work experience’ should be in an area of interest to the young person and match their aspirations for future employment.
   2. Young people expect to receive a board overview of the organisation they are undertaking work experience with in order to gain a fuller understanding of the world of work. When undertaking such experience they expect to undertake a number of meaningful, but appropriate tasks in order to gain practical skills but also to shadow or observe more senior members of staff to gain a wider range of knowledge of how an organisation works at different levels.
   3. Having young people enter into the workplace can bring a new ideas and enthusiasm to a team, which will benefit businesses. However, it is recognised that those undertaking work experience will likely be inexperienced and will need higher levels of support.
   4. As such, businesses should primarily view the provision of work experience placements as a longer term investment in the future workforce and something which will help ensure that future generations of workers are fully equipped when entering into employment.
2. **How important is a good quality work experience to a successful industrial strategy?**
   1. The unsuitability of young people entering into the world of work is frequently noted by businesses and employers. Indeed, research by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) found that 56% of businesses were not satisfied with young people’s relevant work experience when leaving school or college.[[2]](#endnote-2)
   2. The resulting ‘skills gap’ and lack of people being ‘work ready’ has left employers unable to fill their vacancies. As such, there were 806,000 job vacancies from February to April 2018, an increase of 17,000 on the year and 342,000 over a five year period.[[3]](#endnote-3)
   3. This is particularly pertinent when the scale of the vacancies is set against the 531,000 young people who were unemployed during February to April 2018.[[4]](#endnote-4)
   4. As such it is clear that good quality work experience should form part of a successful industrial strategy, alongside a range of other measures aimed at closing the ‘skills gap’ and ensuring young people are able to effectively transition into the workplace after full-time education.
3. **What evidence is there that work experience boosts social mobility?**
   1. As previously mentioned, employers are arguing that a lack of work experience, among other factors, is contributing to young people being ill-prepared for the world of work. Indeed, research undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) found that 39% of employers said their graduate recruits required significant training in order to perform junior roles effectively.[[5]](#endnote-5)
   2. The vast majority of employers responding to the research (91%) also said this problem created extra work for other members of staff, while 64% said it made life more stressful for employers.
   3. In the best instances employers are willing to make this investment and provide a young person with the training they need to succeed in the role. However, for many the lack of skills and experience they have is an insurmountable barrier as employers are unwilling to hire them and make this investment.
   4. Indeed, young people frequently speak of being in a ‘catch-22’ situation when they are unable to gain employment because they do not have sufficient experience and are unable to gain experience because no one will hire them.
   5. As such, many young people are unable to enter into the labour market in a meaningful way, and instead get stuck in a cycle of low-pay, no-pay work as they find themselves in a succession of short-term, part time, zero-hour contract based jobs with periods on and off benefits.
   6. The result is a lack of social mobility with young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds often falling further behind as parents and carers are unable to sufficiently support them financially while they look for suitable sustained work.
   7. YMCA England and Wales’s research into apprenticeships revealed that only half of young people (50%) had any previous experience in the field prior to undertaking their apprenticeship.[[6]](#endnote-6)
   8. While prior experience in a field is not always a necessary prerequisite for success, it can help a young person choose the right course for them and increase the chance of completion and progression.
   9. In addition, without proper guidance, support and experience, a young person can quickly become trapped in an unnecessary ‘cycle’ of undertaking low-level qualifications that do little to help them progress in their careers, but instead, succeed in making them become despondent and unmotivated.
   10. Providing young people with support, advice and work experience early on increases their chance of pursuing the right option for them the first time around, allowing them to progress quicker and increase social mobility.

**Young people**

1. **How do differences between young people (e.g. geographic location, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability) affect the work experience opportunities that people have?**
2. Given that schools and colleges are no longer obligated to provide all young people with work experience the majority of placements tend to be found through personal or family connections.

**5.2** While in theory all are able to find such placements, speaking to young people reveals the extent of the additional barriers that some face in finding meaningful work experience.

**5.3** Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often have fewer opportunities available to them, especially when they wish to pursue a more professionalised career, which they are unlikely to have access to through their existing networks.

**5.4** Those from more rural areas are likely to face additional challenges of accessibility to work experience placements where there is nothing suitable in the nearby vicinity. Often these individuals have to rely on public transport, which can be limiting and expensive, creating an additional barrier to undertaking meaningful and relevant work experience.

**5.5** Those with disabilities who require additional measures or assistance will also likely face additional challenges securing work experience placements. While this is dependent on the organisation and the needs of the individual, companies will often be reluctant to put in place the additional support needed for short periods of time. Often this is due to a lack of funding, expertise or practical problems rather than malicious intent, especially with smaller organisations that are not well equipped. However, the result remains that a young person with disabilities is likely to find it harder to access a work experience placement and is therfore placed at a disadvantage.

1. **How could resources to help young people find out about and access work experience be improved?**
   1. Speaking to young people reveals the largely negative experience that many of them had when undertaking work experience. For the majority of these individuals the work experience undertaken was seen as ‘something they are made to do’ rather than something through which they could gain the essential skills they need when entering the workplace.
   2. As such, young people need to be supported to find meaningful work experience with the help of careers guidance from trained and impartial professionals. While resources are helpful, these should not be as a substitute to one-to-one support from professional careers advisors who support an individual throughout their educational career and advise them on the best course of action for entering into their chosen careers.
   3. Furthermore, it is important that those who have left school have the same access to such quality support, advice and work experience, particularly when experiencing periods of unemployment. Speaking to young people reveals countless instances where they have been pressured into unsuitable or irrelevant training courses and work experience by job centres.
   4. In such instances, young people’s ambitions and long-term careers are sacrificed for short-term employment opportunities that do little to help them sustain employment and progress. It is important that a young person’s employment status and financial situation does not prevent them from undertaking those opportunities open to others. In order to help them overcome these barriers, it is critical that job centre staff are equipped with the necessary information to help support a young person to undertake work experience placements and onto suitable courses.

1. **Should compulsory work experience for under-16s be reinstated? What is the right age for work experience within compulsory education: 14-16 or 16-18?**

**7.1** YMCA believes the Government should guarantee all students in Years 10 and 11 access to at least three weeks of meaningful work experience, including those not in mainstream education.

1. **How could schools and colleges be better supported to help their students access quality work experience?**

**8.1** The information given to young people should also extend beyond that given by traditional careers advisors. Instead, professional careers advice should be supplemented with information given by employers and training providers about the realities of working and studying, and the work experience opportunities available.

**8.2** It is important, therefore, that the responsibility of informing young people about the options available to them is not placed solely on schools and colleges, but instead, an obligation is also placed on employers and training providers to actively engage and enter into educational institutions, helping to promote opportunities and encourage participation.

**8.3** In addition, employers should work with schools to provide quality work experience opportunities to young people, allowing them to gain an insight into their chosen career before committing to follow a chosen career path.

1. **What role should the Government have in ensuring young people have access to quality work experience?**
   1. The Government should reinstate the duty placed on schools to provide work-related learning at Key-Stage 4 to all students.
   2. However, as mentioned previously the responsibility to ensure that young people are equipped to enter into the world of work must extend beyond schools. This is particularly important for those who have left formal education.
   3. YMCA’s *‘Safety Net or Springboard?’[[7]](#endnote-7)* research found that rather than preparing and helping young people find work, in many cases the existing job centre arrangements merely dehumanise those who access its services, damaging their confidence and in some cases even setting back their journey into employment.
   4. As such, the research found that if job centres are to improve their offer to young people, their aspirations need to match those of the individuals accessing their services. Accordingly, job centres need to be focused on helping individuals to find sustained employment and build lasting careers, not merely providing short-term fixes and seeking to end their claims.
   5. To do this, governments have to free job centres from the targets and time constraints that restrict them from providing tailored support that young people need. Tackling the existing problem also requires an investment in job centre staff to equip them with the skills they need to address the unique challenges that young people face.
   6. YMCA proposed that the Youth Obligation be matched with an obligation on job centres. To be effective in supporting young people into employment, this obligation and the support offered by job centres needs to be underpinned by the following key themes emerging from the research:
      1. Listening to and engaging young people – Job centres need to become places where young people are treated like humans, listened to and have a say in designing the support they receive.
      2. Providing a personalised service to each young person – Job centres need to recognise that every young person is different and the support they provide should reflect these differences.
      3. Concentrating on the long term future of young people – Job centres need to focus on building young people’s skills and experience and support them to find sustained employment.
2. **Should the Government invest in resources to help young people find work experience independently? What would these resources ideally look like?**
   1. Ensuing young people have effective access to work experience requires a coordinated approach from a number of parties including parents and carers, schools and colleges, businesses, third sector organisations and governments.
   2. While attempts by young people to find work experience independently are welcomed, it is important that investment is focused on the infrastructure which will support all young people to undertake meaningful investment rather than just those who are most able.
3. **How could private and third sector organisations be better supported and encouraged to help young people access quality work experience?**
   1. As previously mentioned, business and private sector organisations have a vital role in supporting young people both in gaining access to quality work experience and preparing them for the world of work more generally. This role also extends to third sector organisations.
   2. It is critical that these businesses and organisations form partnerships with schools and colleges whereby representatives are present in institutions to help guide young people and promote the opportunities they have. This process could be facilitated by better outreach from educational institutions to organisations in their local area and their role being formalised within the curriculum.
   3. However, the role of organisations extends beyond educational settings. This is particularly important when a young person has left school or college and is struggling to find work.
   4. In the simplest sense such organisations can help young people access quality work experience by providing placements themselves. However, in many instances their role can go further by equipping young people with the skills and confidence they need to apply for work experience and get the most out of placements.
   5. The additional assistance provided to young people through outside organisations is particularly critical when a young person has experienced long periods of unemployment or faces additional challenges in entering the work place.
   6. Governments and local authorities have a role in allowing organisations continue to carry out this work by ensuring that such programmes are sufficiently funded. This is particularly important for third sector organisations that do not have sufficient funds internally to sustain such programmes in the long term.
4. **Conclusion**
   1. Employers are continually stating that young people are ill-prepared for the world of work and that as a consequence, they are unable to fill their vacancies.
   2. Undertaking work experience is often the first taste of the world of work that young people have, and it forms a vital component of making a young person ready for employment once they’ve finished education.
   3. It is important, therefore, that all young people are sufficiently supported to undertake meaningful work experience while they are at school, but also that these opportunities are available for young people later on in life as needed.

**June 2018**

1. British Chambers of Commerce, *Workforce Survey,* July 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Confederation of British Industry, *The Right Combination,* July 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Summary of Labour Market Statistics,* May 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Summary of Labour Market Statistics,* May 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Chartered institute of Management Accountants, *Mind the Skills Gap,* November 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. YMCA England and Wales ‘Work in Progress’, April 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. YMCA England ‘Safety Net or Springboard?’, September 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)